The Foundations of Ethno-Religious Politics and Conflicts in Nigeria, 1914-1966: A Critical Review of Existing Literature

Sunday Moses Adebayo Aloko
Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of ethno-religious dynamics on Nigeria's social structure, political interactions, and national identity. Drawing on over 40 scholarly sources, spanning historical texts, political analyses, and sociological theories, this study traces the roots of Nigeria's ethno-religious tensions from the colonial era to the present. It engages key works by scholars such as Afigbo (1972), Nnoli (1978), Ake (2000), and Falola and Heaton (2020), as well as speeches by Nigeria's founding fathers. Using the historical method, the paper situates these challenges within the colonial experience, where British policies institutionalised ethnic and religious divisions. It argues that post-colonial leadership largely failed to address these divisions due to political self-interest. The review concludes that while ethnicity and religion hold potential for unity, they have more often been manipulated as instruments of division, particularly through "divide and rule" tactics. The study, thus, contributes to ongoing debates on national integration, identity politics, and conflict resolution by emphasising the need to confront historical legacies as a path toward democratic governance and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnoreligious conflicts, national integration, identity politics, colonial rule, Nigeria

Introduction

Perhaps the two most dangerous threats to the realization of true democracy in Nigeria are ethnic and religious sentiments, along with the needless and avoidable tensions and conflicts they have caused since the country's formation in 1914. Thus, the country's long-term dream of exemplifying what unity in diversity entails has been a mirage because its citizens live in constant fear, mutual suspicion, and mutual distrust, which have hindered the process of nation-building and its attendant dividends (Akinola, 2021; Okeke & Eze, 2022). The failed nation-building efforts since 1960 have not only suppressed nationalist feelings and patriotism but also weakened the essential unity and cooperation needed for comprehensive development.

Consequently, ordinary Nigerians who have been relegated to the bottom rung of humanity have concluded that it is either the concept of one Nigeria that does not exist or that it has ceased to exist (Ibeanu & Momoh, 2020). Within this pessimistic perspective lie others who argue that if one Nigeria exists, it does belong to the priv-ileged few who have besieged it soon after the demise of British colonial rule (Onuoha, 2022). These perceptions undoubtedly point to a bleak future for Nigeria and Nigerians and threaten the corporate existence of polity. It is worth noting that the unfortunate prevailing conditions are the result of deliberate mismanagement and manipulation of the country's rich diversity by unscrupulous politicians who continue to exploit it for their own benefit rather than leveraging the divergent ideas and innovations that come with it.

Nigeria's deep-seated ethno-religious quagmire is one of the legacies bequeathed by the British colonial rule between 1900 and 1960. During this period, the colonial masters utilized the policy of divide and rule to tear the people apart and deny them the benefits of unity of purpose against their common foe, the British imperialists. Post-colonial Nigerian leaders have followed suit, consolidating the process of underdevelopment initiated by their British predecessors (Adebayo, 2023; Eze & Nwankwo, 2022). The period from 1914 to 1966

*Contact author: smaaloko@gmail.com

is critical for unmasking the foundations of the crises. While 1914 marked the birth of modern Nigeria and the modern politico-economic and socio-cultural history of the country, 1966 is monumental in light of the fact that the ethno-religious politics that featured prominently since the amalgamation of Northern and Southern protectorates brought the country's first democratic dispensation to an abrupt end. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the foundations of Nigeria's ethno-religious politics and conflicts and their effects on contemporary socio-political and economic relations among Nigerians.

Ethnicity and Religion: Towards a Conceptual Framework

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multireligious, and multilingual country. Agbiboa and Okem (2022) have shown that in 2022, the country's population was estimated to be around 216.7 million, comprising approximately 250 ethnic groups and various religious groups, which are further divided into sects. It is thus a very complex and volatile society given the fact that religion and ethnicity are identity-based, divisive, inherently prone to conflict, and capable of fostering socio-political fragmentation that is inimical to the realization of national unity and cohesion. This is especially true of the country that has been bedeviled by the scourge of poverty and illiteracy (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023), which is also a potent breeding ground for tensions and conflicts. However, it is instructive to note that ethno-religious relations are not destined to engender conflict, except for their manipulation by politicians and ethnic and religious champions in their quest for power. On this note, Ake (2000) cautioned the intellectual community to examine the conditions that promote ethno-religious conflicts, rather than adopting an antagonistic position towards religion and the ethnic factor in Africa's history.

To this end, it may be argued that the difficulty in achieving political equality in the allocation of scarce resources is one of the major factors leading to unhealthy rivalry along ethnic and religious lines. Moreover, ethnic factors are particularly pronounced when socio-economic and political relations in a society are predicated on competition rather than cooperation and are characterized by prejudice and segregation on all fronts (Nnoli, 1978). Over the years, the Nigerian experience has reflected the central argument of Okwudiba Nnoli, who contends that ethnic politics has been a major obstacle to national integration and development. Hence, defective socio-political institutions and non-inclusive governance heightened sectarian consciousness and tendencies in the country, reducing the idea of citizenship to a myth. Little wonder why Maxwell (2007) correctly observed that everything depends on leadership. In this regard, it may be appropriate to suggest that the use of ethnic and religious identities in the struggle for power and space within the national political landscape, which has led to sectarian crises, is a consequence of leadership failure in Nigeria.

The concepts of ethnicity and religion have been extensively explored in many studies (Caselli & Coleman, 2012; Imobighe, 2003; Jinadu, 2007; Suberu, 1997; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005) However, attempts would be made to examine a few of them with direct bearing on this discourse. Handelman (2003) conceives of ethnicity as being associated with a common historical origin, a specific language, culture, traditions, and aspirations that are often confined to a particular geography. In this broad context, ethnicity is viewed as categorizing people or groups according to their perceived distinct identity and character traits that distinguish them from others. This perceived distinction is assumed to be deeply rooted in people's historical experiences and is passed on from one generation to the next. The fundamental problem with this definition is twofold. First, it provides a basis for pursuing separatist objectives that are opposed to national interests and objectives. Second, uniting and integrating various peoples into a whole, especially in a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria, becomes very difficult, if not impossible.

Consistent with the argument above, Jimada (2002) argues that the ethnic identities and

cultures of Nigerians are fluid and overlapping, with no single ethnic group being strictly distinct. Consequently, viewing any Nigerian ethnic group as completely distinct from others is historically and culturally misleading. This probably explains why it is very difficult to establish a clear distinction between some historically related groups, such as the Edo-speaking people from Yoruba, the Nupe groups from Yoruba-speaking people, and the Ibibio people from Igbo-speaking people in Eastern Nigeria (Jimada, 2002). To highlight the fluid and overlapping nature of Nigerian ethnicities from a historical viewpoint, Usman (2000) has controversially noted that Nigerian ethnicities, as they exist today, were only formed through processes that led to the country's creation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In other words, they were nonexistent before the expansion of British imperialist activities in the area that is now Nigeria.

His argument, which was most likely predicated on the ideology of nationalist historiography, was met with stiff resistance. Ekeh (2014) has, for instance, accused Usman of attempting to rig the historical process of the country by invariably validating the mischievous claim made by Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper that Africa had no history until the arrival of Europeans. Ekeh's strong response suggests that Usman, who had dedicated much of his scholarship to combating the ills of colonial historiography, has fallen victim to imperialist propaganda aimed at justifying British colonization of Africa. This is because he fully agrees with Bolaji Akinyemi's (2001) assertion that the Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Idoma, Igbo, Urhobo, and Ijaw nationalities, among others, predated the Nigerian nation created by the British.

It should be noted that although the nationalist content of the Usmanian school of thought is undoubtedly vulnerable considering historical facts, it has drawn the attention of historians, political scientists, and sociologists to several critical issues. While it is true that Nigeria's ethnicities predate contact with the British, it is equally true that ethnic consciousness and differ-

entiation were heightened during the colonization of the people through the policy of divide and rule (Ake, 2020). In the process of colonization, the pre-existing differences of the people were deliberately reinforced by the British to separate the Nigerian people and thwart all attempts to achieve unity against colonization. For instance, in Zaria, while the inhabitants of Zaria were confined to the city walls, immigrants within the defunct northern region were meant to settle in Tudun Wada. At the same time, those from the southern part of the country were encouraged to settle in *Sabon Gari-New* Town (Tukur, 1979).

Hence, the evolution of ethnicities into contending political blocs in Nigeria started during the colonial period and gained momentum in the post-colonial period. This situation, most likely, informed the definition of ethnicity as the deployment of group identity and differences to gain advantage in competition for scarce resources and in situations of cooperation and conflict (Osaghae, 1995). Similar to Osaghae's position, Joireman (2003) opined that the concept of identity and its usage are subjective and geared towards the politics of belonging. It is instructive to note that the emotional ties that bind members of these groups together can make them resort to violence against constituted authority or each other, especially when some of these groups either feel marginalized or fail to gain the upper hand in the distribution of national resources.

In sociological discourse, religion is regarded as a central component of social formation throughout human history. Durkheim's seminal writing on the subject defines religion as a system of unified beliefs and practices related to sacred things (Durkheim, 1915). It is important to note that the sacred things Durkheim mentioned extend beyond gods and spirits. They also include a community's moral standards, which all members are expected to uphold and adhere to. This highlights the fact that religion encompasses not only one's relationship with the supernatural, but also with the natural realm, which includes humans and society. This explains why Weber (1962) asserted that religion lends legitimacy to the powers in a state

and plays a significant role in sustaining societal power structures. Hence, the role of religion in shaping and reshaping human societies cannot be overstated, nor can the impact of societies on religious organizations and functions be under-estimated. The relationships between the two are mutually interlocked. For instance, while Islam and Christianity continue to play critical roles in almost every aspect of Nigeria's national life, the ruling class has continued to permeate and manipulate them to stay glued to power.

The contributions of Karl Marx cannot be overlooked. For Marx, religion was a human creation, either to regulate behavior or to help the ruling class dominate and exploit the working class ((Marx, 1843) Marx's view seemed to have resonated with (Lenin, 1972 [1909]) who argued that the fundamental goal of religion is to blunt the sharpness of people's intelligence and workers' productive capacity. According to Marxists, religion is the result of man's inability to understand events in nature (Marx & Engels, 1997). Therefore, religion will naturally fade when science and technology reach their peak and provide accurate explanations for natural events (Marx, 1843).

Although the Marxist prognosis is rapidly becoming a reality in developed societies of Western Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, it has yet to be fully realized in Africa, and Nigeria in particular. The reason isn't far-fetched; the political class has weaponized poverty so much that many Nigerians now seek help from supernatural forces, which Marxist theorists can only see as delusional fantasies. Nigeria, therefore, reflects Marx's most famous idea about religion in his critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, which states: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people" (Marx, 1843, p. 145).

The Nigerian state has consistently polit-icized religion, despite philosophers recom-mending it as a private matter for societal peace and progress, using it instead to advance political power. Religion and ethnicity, partic-ularly in the conservative Northern Nigeria, have become intertwined, with Islam remaining largely unchanged, whereas Christianity in the South has evolved. Politicians exploit these divisions, turning the country into a battleground between the predominantly Christian South and the Muslim North, despite the shared roots and teachings between the two religions (Suberu, 2021). The real issue lies not in religion and ethnicity themselves but in how the ruling elite manipulates these identities to maintain power.

The Lugardian Indirect Rule System Re-examined

The imposition of British rule in Nigeria was premised on the ill-conceived notion that the people had always been at war with each other in pre-colonial times and suffered oppression in the hands of their rulers (Olaniyan, 2013). It thus became necessary for the British to conquer and rule these territories to 'civilize the natives' and maintain law and order. But the truth is that every human society, past and present, has expe-rienced conflicts both internally and externally. Conflict is the result of disagreements arising from relationships among people. It is therefore essential to acknowledge that African societies also had complex sociocultural, economic, and political networks prior to colonization (Ake, 2020). Their relationship was not exclusively conflict-based, as colonial historiography has painted it. The British administered Nigeria, both directly and indirectly. The direct method of administration involved the utilization of British institutions and the enforcement of their ideas of government in the Crown Colony.

In contrast, the indirect method (indirect rule system), which used the indigenous systems of the colonized people, was practiced in the protec-torates (Afigbo, 1972). The indirect rule system has become more pronounced due to its extensive coverage and profound impact on Nigeria's past and present. The system introduced in 1906, which was widely believed to have preserved Nigeria's existing political systems, cultures,

and traditions (Afigbo, 1972), also had damaging effects on Nigeria's ethnic and religious fabric.

First, it preserved the ethnic identities of Nigeria's various peoples, especially in the north, where the system worked effectively. The purported preservation of the emirate system in Northern Nigeria emasculated the absolute powers of the emirs. Also, it conferred a measure of legitimacy on British de facto rule in the emirate. Thus, contrary to the dominant perspective on this theme, British respect for the customs and traditions of the people was not merely a means to preserve their imperial interests but also played a major role in the success of the system. It has also been argued that the structural preservation of people's separate identities has complicated the process of national integration in Nigeria (Agbiboa & Okem, 2011). Similarly, the dominant perspective on the factors that contributed to the success of the indirect rule system in the North, which centers on the preservation of pre-colonial structures such as taxation, religion, respect for traditional institutions, and literacy levels, among other factors, does not suffice. The success of the system can only become fully intelligible in light of Lord Lugard's relationship with emirs during and after the conquest of Northern Nigeria.

Thomas Morland, who led Lugard's final assault on the seat of the Caliphate, is said to have mobilized only 25 officers, 650 troops, and two Maxim guns against the Sultanate's 15,000 cavalry and 3,000-foot soldiers; only a hundred Sokoto fighters and one British carrier were killed (Bourne, 2015). Deductively, the caliphate's fighters were frightened into submission. Five days later, the emirs were reported to have surrendered to Lugard, who supervised the election of a new Sultan (Bourne, 2015). In this peaceful atmosphere, a negotiated settlement was reached between the British and the emirates, which committed them to the success of the indirect rule system in exchange for the protection of Islam against the spread of Christianity and Western education, which they considered antithetical to Islam. In a show of their commitment in tandem with the sanctity of

the Islamic faith, the emirs swore an oath that reads:

> I swear in the name of Allah, and of Mahomed, his Prophet, to well and truly serve His Majesty King Edward VII and his Representative, the High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria, to obey the laws of the Protectorate and the lawful commands of the High Commissioner and the Resident, provided that they are not contrary to my religion. (Perham, 1956, p. 152)

Therefore, the sense of belonging to the system and the satisfaction that came from the British decision not to cross the emirs' red line contributed to the system's success. The British believed it was essential to keep the North away from Christian missions to preserve law and order, which they thought would be challenged by those activities. However, in doing this, the British sacrificed the interests of the Northern minority, who might have been receptive to Christianity and Western education, on the altar of their colonial objectives (Ubah, 1988), disregarding their history of resilience that helped them resist the Fulani jihadists' attempts to impose Islamic faith on them. It should be noted, however, that the change in leadership in Lagos and Kaduna, brought about by the arrival of Sir Donald Cameron and C.W. Alexander in the 1930s, paved the way for missionary activities in the North, resulting in the conversion of a few (Ubah, 1988). This explains the existence of a minority Christian population in Northern Nigeria.

Similarly, while the sanctity of the Islamic faith was preserved in the North, traditional religious practices in the South were not due to the influence of Christian Missions in the area, which had already opened it up to Western influence. Furthermore, the British could not negotiate taxation with the people because of its centrality to the success of the colonial economy, which was designed to be self-sustaining (Ake, 2020). Therefore, the divide-and-rule policy of the British, evident in the indirect rule system,

succeeded in keeping the people of the North and South apart administratively on ethnic and religious lines, rather than working towards a compromise between the two that would have prepared them for future unity. The local government reforms of 1976, which democratized and established a uniform system of local government administration nationwide (Adebayo, 2023), were implemented to address these anomalies.

The Amalgamation of 1914: A Little New Light

The formation of a single politico-administrative unit in Nigeria in 1914 appears to have been informed by the British conceptual understanding of the distinct pre-colonial political systems of the various peoples that now make up Nigeria. This understanding was based on the notion that the kingdoms, chiefdoms, and empires had well-defined boundaries which separated them from each other (Bourne, 2015). However, a concrete historical analysis has shown that some territories overlapped with each other, primarily due to wars of conquest and expansion that brought weaker territories into tributary relationships with more powerful states. Similarly, apart from dynastic ties such as the case of Old Oyo and Benin kingdoms, Igala, Egbirra, and Idoma peoples, evidence of inter-group relations through intermarriages, trade, and sociocultural exchanges abound before the conquest and subsequent incorporations of Nigeria into the defunct British Empire (Bourne, 2015).

Nevertheless, the British considered merging their protectorates in the North and South of the country with the colony of Lagos as early as 1898 (Bourne, 2015). Lugard justified the amalgamation by arguing that the wealthier South, with its extensive coastline and ports, could support the less economically developed North, which is landlocked, larger, and more populous (Perham, 1937). For example, the £135,000 budgeted for the north in 1900 had to be supplemented with £45,000 by the Southern Protectorate (Olaniyan, 2013). This was in addition to the grants-in-aid that came from London, chiefly

for railway construction and river dredging (Olaniyan, 2013). The colonial government aimed to eliminate subsidies or grants-in-aid to colonies because of the early 20th-century policy of self-sufficiency. This policy required colonial territories, rather than the metropole, to generate revenue (primarily through colonial taxation) to fund colonial projects. The policy was significantly influenced by retarded industrial growth in Britain as well as the devastating impact of the First World War (Gardner, 2012). These two critical challenges made it impossible for the British to meet the multiplying demands of their overseas territories.

Another popular argument that is often advanced for the amalgamation of 1914 is that it sought to promote unity in Nigeria (Falola & Heaton, 2020). The establishment of the Nigerian Council in 1914 by the amalgamator, Lord Lugard, as a platform that brought the North and the South together for the first time in the country's history, is often brought up as an example of the British attempt to unite the people of Nigeria (Falola & Heaton, 2020). The major problem with this argument is that the history of colonization in Africa has demonstrated that colonizers have often acted otherwise. The reason is that colonization thrives on the disunity of the colonized and was realized through the destructive policy of divide and rule.

A study by Ojo (2014) showed that there was no reference to Nigeria's unity in the 173-page report in which Lugard made his argument for the amalgamation of Nigeria. On the contrary, the amalgamation was intended to unite the territories of the North and South, not the people, to consolidate the territorial gains made by the British during the conquest of Nigeria. Therefore, while the British succeeded in uniting the territories, they deliberately failed to unite the people, perhaps because they felt that doing so would have jeopardized their colonial enterprise in the country.

Undoubtedly, the integration of the two territories into one was intended to synchronize the economies of the North and South for effective

colonial administration as well as to exploit their human and natural resources (Akinola, 2020). Hence, the British took a firm grip on Nigeria after the amalgamation and established an outlet in the hinterland for the movement of goods and services to the coast without hindrances. Regrettably, however, in the process of pursuing their imperial objectives, the British created a geographical imbalance that conferred undue political and economic advantages to the North. Politically, it enjoys more federal constituencies and, by implication, more seats in parliament, a key decision-making branch of government. On the economic front, it leaves the north with more land for economic activities than the south, which is very small in size. The result has caused discontent among Southerners, who feel that the amalgamation was rigged in favor of Northern hegemony (Nnoli, 2021).

It is against this backdrop that Chief Fred Agbaje unapologetically declared that the amalgamation of 1914 was the beginning of Nigeria's problem because it was criminal, served only British economic and political interests, and placed the administration of Nigeria in the hands of a section of the country instead of promoting equitable distribution of power (Cited in Onwuka, 2021). Akin to his position, Nwankwo (2018) considered the amalgamation of 1914 an arranged marriage between the poor North as the husbandman and the rich South as the wife, which, according to him, was designed to give the North undeserved political power over the South so that they could control the resources of the South permanently. Some of these arguments have been refuted and described as the myth of 1914 by the late Y.B. Usman and Alkasum Abba (2000). The facts on the ground no doubt point to the North's political supremacy over the South.

Figure 1: *Map of Nigeria Showing the North and the South Divide*
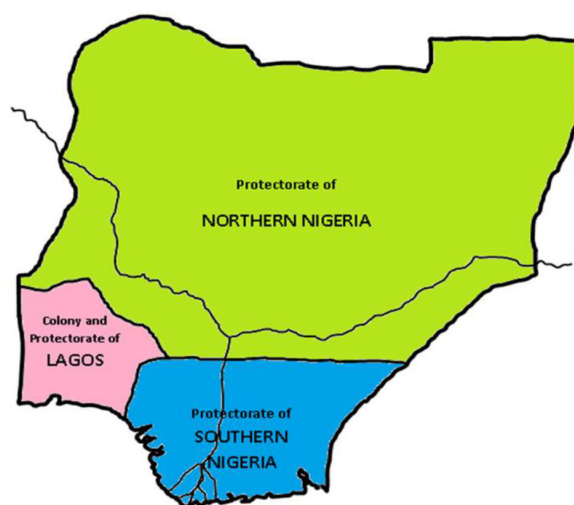
The flaws of the amalgamation can also be seen in the views of some of the country's founding fathers. In 1948, the first and only Prime Minister of Nigeria, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, commented on the amalgamation:

> Since 1914 the British Government has been trying to make Nigeria into one country, but the Nigerian people themselves are historically different in their backgrounds, in their religious beliefs and customs and do not show themselves any signs of willingness to unite … Nigerian unity is only a British invention (Balewa, 1948, p.56).

Similarly, Chief Obafemi Awolowo noted the following in 1947:

> Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no 'Nigerians' in the same sense as there are 'English,' 'Welsh,' or 'French,' The word 'Nigeria' is a mere distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria and those who do not. (Awolowo, 1967, p. 56)

In the same vein, Nigeria's first president, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe argued that:

> It is better for us and many admirers abroad that we should disintegrate in peace and not in pieces. Should the politicians fail to heed the warning, then I will venture the prediction that the experience of the Democratic Republic of Congo will be a child's play if it ever comes to our turn to play such a tragic role (Azikiwe, 1964, as cited in *Time*, 1966, para. 1).

For Sir Ahmadu Bello, the 1914 amalgamation was a mistake (Akinrinade, 2000). He probably regretted that it had ever happened and perhaps felt that it should not be allowed to continue. These views, held by those who played a major role in Nigeria's evolution as a nation state, are not only uninspiring but also discouraging. One may be tempted to ask: if the founding fathers of the country did not believe in one Nigeria, why should the younger generation? Alternatively, would it not be in the interest of the people to break up from the unholy alliance that the British forced the people of the country into? These legitimate questions become necessary given that the senseless and avoidable conflicts it has generated have led to the loss of many lives and will probably cost more in the future if nothing is done to avert them. What is unequivocal is the fact that by preserving the pre-existing differences among the component units that make up Nigeria.

Lugard only created a colonial country for his imperial government in London, not a country for the people of Nigeria. More disturbing is the fact that the founding fathers, who wielded significant influence over the various people they represented in both colonial and post-colonial Nigeria, did not do much to foster unity among people. Thus, they handed over a deeply divided nation to the younger generation, who had lost confidence in the union, which had not been effective since 1914.

The Institutionalization of Ethno-Religious Politics in Nigeria, 1914-1960

As the commercial and administrative headquarters of British rule in Nigeria, Lagos was beyond reasonable doubt the cradle of Nigeria's party politics. The Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), the first political party in the country, owed its existence to the regional nationalist efforts of Casely Hayford's led National Council of British West Africa (NCBWA), which brought together the British West African territories to exert pressure on the British for reforms that would advance the course of the colonized people. The concessions made by the imperial government in London not only resulted in the introduction of a legislative council in British West Africa but also led to the establishment of a similar council in British East Africa. It also ushered in the formation of political parties, the first being the NNDP, which was formed by Herbert Macauley in 1923 to contest elections for the four seats allocated for Lagos and Calabar (Meredith, 2005).

The party which has been described as parochial because its activities were confined to Lagos, was not an ethnic-based political party. It was unmistakably pan-African, as it drew its membership from a constellation of intelligentsias of African descent and Lagosians who even prioritized Africa over Nigeria. Some non-Nigerians at the highest echelon of the NNDP included Egerton Shyngle, a Gambian and its first president, and J.C. Zizer, a Sierra Leonean and its first solicitor (Sklar, 2016). This brings to the fore the far-reaching impact of the pan-Africanist movement, which was premised on the liberation, unity, and development of Africa as a whole, as well as the much-felt impact of missionary education in Lagos, which attracted professionals, academics, journalists, and barristers, who also contributed to the struggle for the independence of Nigeria.

Similarly, the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), the second political party in Nigeria, had no ethnic or religious undertones. It made history the first multi-ethnic political party in the country, owing to its forty branches outside Lagos and its

national outlook. Like the NYM, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) was also national in outlook and its activities. Founded on August 26, 1944, it was led by Herbert Macaulay and Azikiwe as President and Secretary, respectively (Aloko & Usman, 2014). The party, whose goals included, among other things, the inclusion and involvement of Nigerians in the country's affairs, was also determined to gain independence for the country. For instance, the imposition of a new constitution by Governor Arthur Richards in 1946 without consulting the colonized people angered its leaders who toured the nation to mobilize support (Aloko & Usman, 2014). In the same spirit of national unity, Azikiwe led a delegation to London in protest of the constitution, which failed to address their yearnings for democratic governance, with the aim of having it revised in favor of the Nigerian people (Sklar, 2016). Although their demands were rejected because the Constitution had already taken effect, it nevertheless compelled the colonial government to review the constitution within less than three years, much earlier than intended. Hence, the NCNC, which dominated the Nigerian political landscape until the emergence of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and Action Group (AG) in 1951, generated national solidarity and de-emphasized ethnicity and religion in its politics.

It is instructive to note that the historicity of ethno-religious politics in Nigeria is traceable to the promulgation of the Richards Constitution of 1946, which became operational on January 1, 1947. Richards' division of the country into regions was not carried out on neutral ground. It was executed in a manner that reflected the major ethnic divisions of the country. Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. Consequently, the minority groups, which merged with the major ethnicities of the country, agitated for their regions due to marginalization, whether real or perceived, a development that led to the creation of the mid-West region and the state creation process up to 1996 (Sklar, 2016). Hence, far from Richard's stated goals of promoting unity

in Nigeria and ensuring greater involvement of Nigerians in the country, his creation of the Northern, Western, and Eastern regions institutionalized unhealthy ethno-religious politics in the country. Regionalism, a direct consequence of the regional divide, consolidated pre-existing ethnic and religious sentiments, making them more pronounced in Nigeria's national life.

The resultant climate of thought likely contributed to the transformation of cultural organizations such as the Jamiyyar Mutanen Arewa and the Egbe Omo Oduduwa into the NPC and AG, respectively. The regional politics that ensued undoubtedly complicated the ethno-religious relations among Nigerians. It also impeded the country's nationalist struggles as regional interests took precedence over national objectives. Chief Anthony Enahoro's good-intentioned motion in the Federal House of Representatives, Lagos, in 1953, that Nigeria should become self-governing in 1956, only worsened the already tense relations between the South and the North of Nigeria. The AG's motion which was supported by the NCNC was opposed by the leader of the NPC, Ahmadu Bello, because 'it was not practicable' (Albert, 1994). However, concrete historical analyses have shown that the North's rejection of the proposal stemmed from its leaders' perception that it was a ploy by the people of the West and East to dominate them in the civil service, as they lagged behind in Western education. In addition, the likelihood of relying on Southerners for the administration of the northern region at independence was another grave concern for the region's leadership.

The jeering of northern representatives and their declaration as stooges of the British in Lagos after the legislative session did not help matters. This provoked the leaders of the region, who threatened to secede but were dissuaded by the British (Sklar, 1983). Nevertheless, the fallout from the motion led to the first political crisis in Nigeria's history, the Kano Riot of 1953 (Sklar, 1983). The crisis broke out as a result of the S.L. Akintola's led delegation to the ordinary people of Kano in furtherance of AG's independence campaign, which had been turned

down by the Northern elite. The campaign, which was intended to educate the people of the region about the need to support Enahoro's motion and highlight the shortcomings of the leaders who opposed it, offended the regional leaders.

The peaceful protest mobilized against the tour by the NPC leaders and the emir of Kano metamorphosed into a violent conflict in Sabon Gari (New Town), an area with the highest number of southerners in Kano. The senseless and avoidable violent exchanges resulted in the death of at least 241 persons (Albert, 1994). On realizing the difficulty of the regions working together, the then Secretary of State for Colony, Sir Oliver Lyttelton, invited the representatives of the three regions to discuss a new Constitution to replace the Macpherson Constitution of 1951 (Aloko & Usman, 2018). The result of the discussion was the introduction of the Oliver Lyttleton constitution in 1954, which adopted a federal system of government for the country.

The greater regional autonomy which followed the formal introduction of federalism into the country strengthened the power base of the regions and the ability of their leaders to act with greater independence. Hence, the leadership of the Northern region embarked on a northernisation policy aimed at expelling Southerners from the region's public service and replacing them with Northerners, regardless of their qualifications. In 1957, the Northern public service was directed to consider only the employment of southerners if there were no qualified northerners or expatriates available for the position (Albert, 1994). Although the northernization policy was extended to the private sector, the impact was less severe because most southerners in Sabon Gari resorted to the informal sector for survival.

The Richards Constitution further exacerbated Nigeria's religious divide, fostering mutual suspicion and tension within party politics. In Northern Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt, non-Muslims perceived the Northern People's Congress (NPC) as a conservative, Muslim-dominated party intent on monopolizing political power. This perception

united non-Muslim communities in resistance, with Christian missionaries playing a central role in mobilizing and preserving the influence of minority Christian populations amid fears of marginalization (Ayuba, 2008). The Christian church, thus, emerged as a rallying point for political solidarity against perceived Muslim dominance. Religious tensions became particularly pronounced during the 1951 regional elections and were reflected in the Northern House of Assembly (Ayuba, 2008). Reports from 1952 describe a strained atmosphere in which religious discourse frequently disrupted proceedings, such as debates over grants to mission schools (Situation in the Northern Province of Nigeria, 1952, pp.10-15). This shows the deepening Christian-Muslim divide in the region's political landscape.

The growing tensions between Christians and Muslims in Northern Nigeria contributed to the formation of the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) in 1955, which aimed to advocate for the interests of minorities and create a distinct Middle Belt Region with its own legislative structure (Ayuba, 2008). Although UMBC's impact was limited because of its minority status in the Northern Regional Assembly, it advanced the political visibility of minority groups and protected the legacies of missionary influence. Nigeria's independence in 1960 did not reverse the deepening national crisis, as post-colonial leadership largely replicated colonial patterns of governance, particularly the divisive politics of ethnicity and religion. These dynamics undermined national unity and development, and promoted widespread distrust, regional rivalry, and competition for power and resources. This culminated in a series of political crises, including the manipulated census of 1962/63 and the disputed federal elections of 1964, both of which intensified political instability. Ultimately, these unresolved tensions contributed to the military coup on January 15, 1966, which abruptly ended Nigeria's first experiment with democratic governance.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that Nigeria's persistent ethno-religious challenges are deeply rooted in its colonial past, where British rule arbitrarily amalgamated diverse nationalities and dismantled pre-colonial inter-group relations. Far from fostering unity, colonialism entrenched divisions that have persisted into the post-independence era. Nationalist leaders, in their haste for independence, failed to resolve these foundational issues, and successive administrations have continued to build on this flawed legacy. Attempts at reform, such as the federal character principle introduced in 1979, have remained largely theoretical due to a lack of political will. Meanwhile, the political elite continues to exploit ethnic and religious identities for personal gain to the detriment of national cohesion. This paper calls for a reorientation of national consciousness, where the masses recognize their shared struggle and unite against elite manipulation. It advocates an inclusive political framework rooted in fairness, justice, and meritocracy, rather than one shaped by divisive identity politics.

References

Adebayo, A. (2023). The legacy of colonialism and the crisis of development in post-colonial Nigeria. *Journal of African Political Economy*, *11*(1). https://doi.org/10.1234/jape.2023.110102

Agbiboa, D. E., & Okem, A. E. (2022). Unholy trinity: Assessing the impact of ethnicity and religion on national identity in Nigeria. *Peace Research, 43*(2), 5–20.

Afigbo, A. E. (1972). *The warrant chiefs: Indirect rule in Southern Nigeria (1891–1929)*. Longman.

Ake, C. (2000). *The feasibility of democracy in Africa*. CODESRIA.

Ake, C. (2020). The colonial legacy and the challenge of nation-building in Nigeria. In T. Falola & A. Heaton (Eds.), *Colonialism and African states: A critical perspective* (pp. 115–132). Bookcraft.

Akinola, A. O. (2020). Colonial legacies and the challenges of nation-building in Nigeria. In T. Falola (Ed.), *Nationalism and African states: Historical and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 153–175). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-35441-8_7

Akinola, O. (2021). The state, elite capture, and governance failures in Nigeria. *African Studies Quarterly, 20*(3), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.32473/asq.v20i3.99999

Albert, O. A. (1994). Violence in metropolitan Kano: A historical perspective. In E. O. Eghosa et al. (Eds.), *Urban violence in Africa* (pp. 123–145). IFRA-Nigeria.

Aloko, S. M. A., & Usman, A. (2014). Ethnicity, religion and the future of Nigerian democracy. *Scientific Research Journal, 2*(11), 12–19.

Aloko, S. M. A., & Usman, A. (2018). Corruption and underdevelopment in Nigeria: Challenges and solutions. *Scientific Research Journal, 6*(7), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.31364/SCIRJ/v6.i7.2018.P0718538

Ayuba, J. A. (2008). The Bible and political revolution: Religion and minority politics in northern Nigeria, 1945–1957. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 17*, 120–137. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857152

Balewa, A. T. (1948). *Remarks to the Legislative Council* [Legislative speech]. National Archives of Nigeria, Kaduna.

Bolaji, A. (2001, June 15). Nigeria: Devolution of power—prerequisite for national unity. *Vanguard*.

Bourne, R. (2015). *Nigeria: A new history of a turbulent century*. Zed Books.

Caselli, F., & Coleman, W. J. (2012). On the theory of ethnic conflict [Working paper]. London School of Economics. http://personal.lse.ac.uk/casellif/papers/ethnic.pdf

Durkheim, E. (1915). *The elementary forms of religious life*. George Allen & Unwin.

Ekeh, P. (2014). *The mischief of history: Bala Usman's unmaking of Nigerian history*. Urhobo Historical Society.

Ekpu, R. (2017, August 10). Geographical expression: So what? *The Guardian*.

Eze, M. O., & Nwankwo, U. C. (2022). From colonial exploitation to post-colonial misrule: Rethinking the Nigerian development dilemma. *Contemporary African Studies Review, 5*(2), 45–67.

Falola, T., & Heaton, M. M. (2020). *A history of Nigeria* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Gardner, L. A. (2012). *Taxing colonial Africa: The political economy of British rule*. Oxford University Press.

Handelman, H. (2003). *The challenge of third-world development* (4th ed.). Prentice Hall.

Ibeanu, O., & Momoh, A. (2020). Citizenship, identity, and the crisis of integration in Nigeria. In A. Aderinto (Ed.), *Contemporary issues in Nigerian governance* (pp. 35–54). University of Ibadan Press.

Imobighe, T. A. (2003). Ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in Nigeria: An overview. In T. A. Imobighe (Ed.), *Civil society and ethnic conflicts management in Nigeria* (pp. 45–67). Spectrum.

Jinadu, A. L. (2007). *Explaining and managing ethnic conflicts in Africa: Towards a cultural theory of democracy* (Claude Ake Memorial Paper Series No. 1). The Nordic Africa Institute.

Jimada, I. S. (2002). Nigeria and the ethnic question: Redefining ethnicity in Nigeria in the 21st century. *Zahir Journal, 2*(1), 34–56.

Joireman, S. F. (2003). *Nationalism and political identity*. Continuum.

Lenin, V. I. (1972). *The attitude of the working party toward religion*. In V. I. Lenin, *Collected works* (Vol. 15, pp. 402–413). Progress Publishers. (Original work published 1909)

Maxwell, J. C. (2007). *The 21 indispensable qualities of a leader: Becoming the person that people will want to follow*. Thomas Nelson Inc.

Marx, K. (1843). *Critique of Hegel's philosophy of right* [Unpublished manuscript].

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1997). *Selected works* (Vol. 1). Progress Publishers.

Meredith, M. (2005). *The fate of Africa: A history of 50 years of independence*. Public Affairs.

National Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Survey Report*. https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng

Nnoli, O. (1978). *Ethnic politics in Nigeria*. Fourth Dimension.

Nnoli, O. (2021). *Ethnic politics in Nigeria: The colonial roots and contemporary consequences*. Centre for African Studies Press.

Nwankwo, A. (2018). *Nigeria on her path to doom*. Fourth Dimension Publishing.

Ojo, E. O. (2014). From creation to cremation? *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 23*, 1–15.

Okeke, M. I., & Eze, C. C. (2022). The failure of nation-building in Nigeria: A historical and political analysis. *African Journal of Social and Political Studies, 15*(2), 78–95. https://doi.org/10.5678/ajpss.2022.15206

Olaniyan, R. A. (2013). *The amalgamation and its enemies*. Obafemi Awolowo University Press.

Onuoha, F. C. (2022). Ethno-regional cleavages and the threat to Nigeria's corporate existence. *Conflict Trends, 2022*(2). https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/ethno-regional-cleavages-nigeria

Onwuka, E. (2021, February 3). Nigeria: The mistake of 1914. *The News Chronicle*. https://www.thenewschronicle.ng/nigeria-the-mistake-of-1914

Osaghae, E. E., & Suberu, R. T. (2005). *A history of identities, violence, and stability in Nigeria* (pp. 88–110). Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity.

Osaghae, E. (1995). *Structural adjustment and ethnicity in Nigeria*. The Nordic Africa Institute.

Perham, M. (1937). *Native administration in Nigeria*. Oxford University Press.

Perham, M. (1956). *Freda Lugard: The years of adventure, 1858–1898*. Collins.

Public Record Office, Colonial Office. (1952). *Situation in the Northern Province of Nigeria* (PRO CO 554/372).

Shola, A. (2000). Ethnic and religious conflict in Nigeria: What lessons for South Africa? *Strategic Review for South Africa, 22*, 66–81.

Sklar, R. C. (1983). *Nigerian political parties: Power in an emergent African nation*. NOK.

Sklar, R. L. (2016). *Nigerian political parties: Power in an emergent African nation* (pp. 59–140). Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400878239-004

Suberu, R. T. (1996). *Ethnic minority conflicts and governance in Nigeria*. Spectrum Books.

Suberu, R. T. (1997). Federalism, ethnicity and regionalism in Nigeria. In P. A. Beckett & C. Young (Eds.), *Dilemmas of democracy in Nigeria* (pp. 70–89). University of Rochester Press.

Suberu, R. T. (2021). Religion, ethnicity and the politics of identity in Nigeria. In A. Adefuye & M. E. Okoye (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in Nigerian governance and development* (pp. 88–110). Centre for Democracy and Development Press.

Time. (1966, August 12). *Nigeria: Toward disintegration? Time*. https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,842599,00.html

Tukur, M. M. (1979). *The imposition of British colonial administration on the Sokoto Caliphate, Borno, and neighbouring states: A reconsideration of colonial sources* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ahmadu Bello University.

Ubah, C. N. (1988). Christian missionary penetration of the Nigerian emirates: The village school approach. *Trans-African*

Journal of History, 17, 45–64. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24328693

Usman, Y. B., & Abba, A. (2000). *The misrepresentation of Nigeria: The facts and the figures*. Centre for Democratic Development Research and Training.

Weber, M. (1962). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (2nd ed.). Routledge.